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ABSTRACT

In the writing classroom, students and instructors alike must not only theorize experience but must also experience theory. This is no easy task, for despite cultural studies' emphasis on the "subjective side of social relations," contemporary theory is heavily directed toward signifying practices, and, as Lawrence Grossberg argues, affect is often lived through the body and is, in part, a-signifying; thus, scholars have developed an incomplete-at-best critical vocabulary for affective alliances. Yet popular culture works at the "intersections of body and emotion"; the visceral responses that music, images, and fashion elicit cannot be explained merely as an aura of ideological effects. Cultural analysis requires active reading, constructing meaning in a text, rather than passively accepting the authority of the written word. One writing assignment, developed in James Porter's "Audience and Rhetoric" requires students to review the background, discourse conventions, and the form and style of "forums" to help them identify the means through which they might negotiate and be accepted into a discourse community. Since the assignment demands that students analyze the ways they experience their magazine of choice, gender literacy comes to the fore. Students theorize the way affective alliances are formed as they learn what might be considered feminist strategies for analysis and then proceed to study how the magazine constructs readers of a particular magazine as an audience. (Contains 14 references.) (TB)

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# Gender Literacy in the Cultural Studies Composition Classroom: "Fashioning" the "Self" through an Analysis of Popular Magazines

When I first received and browsed through the program for this conference, I felt an overwhelming combination of grief and delight upon unexpectedly seeing a photo of Jim Berlin, in full jogging regalia, alongside an announcement for the Jim Berlin Memorial Run/Walk/Pub Crawl. As I read that T-shirts for the event would also be sold, I laughed aloud. The irony of selling Jim Berlin fashions at this conference, where his is a "designer" name, if you will, in theories of social subjectivity, where, despite his critics' aspersions that it's "only a fad," his work will be "in style" for years to come--the irony is overpowering and empowering. This obvious commodification of Jim's neomarxist work and subject position, it seems to me, demands analysis within his own cultural studies rhetorical framework.

Clearly, very few of us would delimit this commodification by arguing that Jim circulates ONLY as an academic product, fetishized as intellectual currency within a field which values big names as if they're designer labels. To reduce this moment to a structural base of exchange smacks of the "out of fashion" theories of ideology which post-structuralist cultural theories, such as those Jim promoted, have powerfully revised. No, the experience of buying and wearing a Jim Berlin T-shirt in this context, this presentation on Jim Berlin's Legacy, <u>exceeds</u> the ideology of the academy's signifying systems. It represents a moment of emotional

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longing and affective investment: I deeply miss Jim's physical presence, his booming voice when we argued, his grin when he bombasted this expressionist or that modernist. But wearing this T-shirt, partaking in this commodification, also signifies a moment of identification with what Jim's work represented--the possibility for healing, for social transformation and individual empowerment. This identification is an affective one: We fashion our sense of selves based on the affective alliances, the structures and economies of feeling which enable ideology to take hold.

As Jim constantly insisted, "The individual is the location of a variety of significations, but is also an agent of change, not simply an unwitting product of external discursive and material forces. The subject negotiates and resists codes instead of simply accommodating them" ("Composition" 103). Unlike postmodernism's emphasis on textuality, John Trimbur argues, cultural studies demands that we "connect rhetoric both to sign systems and to lived experience in order to understand what Richard Johnson calls the 'logic of combination' by which individuals splice together a sense of self from the textual shards of the most mass-mediated culture in human history" (130). Thus, though neither Jim nor Trimbur have developed comprehensive accounts of it, the realm of affect--in spite of commodification, or perhaps in concert with it--is one of the most powerful arenas for resistance.

Making sense of, theorizing, the affective dimensions of lived experience must become a central locus for any cultural studies composition course which emphasizes gender literacy--the capacity

to identify and understand the ways in which gender is socially constructed within webs of power and difference in our culture. I do not see gender literacy as a stable assemblage of knowledge which might foster, for example, studying women as objects of observation in cultural texts and contexts. Instead, gender literacy is founded upon affective action. As Lynn Worsham argues powerfully and persuasively in "Emotion and Pedagogic Violence," our emotional lives have been colonized by the violence of hegemonic oppression; a humane and truly radical pedagogy demands decolonization at the affective level to reconstitute individuals' emotional lives and to transform what Raymond Williams calls "the structure of feeling" of an age (121-22). Thus, in the writing classroom, in our lives, we must theorize experience, but we must also experience theory.

This is no easy task, for despite cultural studies' emphasis on the "subjective side of social relations" (Johnson 44), contemporary theory is heavily directed toward signifying practices, and, as Lawrence Grossberg argues, affect is often lived through the body and is, in part, a-signifying; thus, we have developed an incomplete-at-best critical vocabulary for affective alliances (80). Yet popular culture works at the "intersections of body and emotion"; the visceral responses that music, images, and fashion elicit cannot be explained merely as an aura of ideological effects" (79).

Now, I am not suggesting here that our feelings and emotions are beyond the ideological. Cultural studies pedagogies, however,

attend to what Anne Balsamo calls, "the kinds of knowledges that are often subjugated...in the academy--knowledges that can't be generalized or easily determined in advance--the knowledges of pleasure [and I would also add pain, desire, and lack] in the consumption of popular culture" (153). Such knowledges are at the center of a forum analysis of popular magazines, which I assign to my composition students. The forum analysis is based upon questions developed by James Porter in Audience and Rhetoric. Porter proposes reviewing the background, discourse conventions, and the form and style of "forums" to help writers identify the means through which they might negotiate and be accepted into a discourse community (see Blair). For the purpose of a cultural critique, I have revised Porter's valuable heuristic in several ways: First, to help students perform cultural analysis, I recast the questions so that students denaturalize the text and identify the key cultural assumptions guiding the magazine's audience construction. Second, over the course of several semesters, I have moved away from teaching the forum analysis as a means of helping students understand the ways discourse communities construct their general audience; I found that such an emphasis simply reenacted a formalist analysis of the magazine as a stable cultural text. I now ask students to focus on how the magazine constructs them as an audience, and how they resist or negotiate that construction. Thus, understanding affective alliances--why one identifies with the seemingly iconoclastic tone of Spin or the sexuality of the Cosmo woman--becomes the locus of the assignment. Moreover, the

forum analysis becomes an opportunity to focus on the rhetorical issues of audience and intertextuality, for I emphasize that cultural analysis requires active reading, constructing meaning in a text, rather than passively accepting the authority of the written word.

Since the assignment demands that students analyze the ways they experience their magazine of choice, gender literacy comes to the fore; students theorize the way affective alliances are formed as they learn what I would consider feminist strategies for analysis. That is, the assignment does not overtly require analysis of the intersections of gender with class, race, and sexuality issues--I have found that such requirements can foster canned "boys aren't supposed to cry" and "girls are supposed to be passive" responses. Instead, students tend to come to gender analysis on their own, for most of the magazines they choose--from Rolling Stone to Redbook to Out--are structured on a masculine/feminine binary that intersects with class and race codes. Moreover, as Diana George and Diana Shoos suggest, rather than assignments which promote a pre-determined conclusion, texts for analysis in cultural studies writing classrooms should present meanings that are unstable for both students and teachers (207). Popular magazines certainly represent this subjective instability.

As Leslie Rabine argues, fashion magazines--and I use the term to encompass any magazine which presents a "style" with which its audience identifies--are quintessential representatives of the logic of postmodernism: they expose and critique hegemonic forces

even as they recuperate and uphold those forces. On the one hand, fashion magazines promote normative and regulatory ideas of gender roles, enforce heterosexist norms of identity, and dehistoricize and conceal relationships between the consumption and production of style, the North American consumer and the immigrant or third world garment worker (63-67). On the other hand, many fashion magazines have been instrumental in circulating information on the women's movement, AIDS, and environmental issues, and style, as Rabine, Dick Hebdige, and others note, is potentially empowering, a means for self-production, expression, and liberation. Iris Marion Young writes, "Implicitly feminist critics of media images of women have tended to assimilate all images of women in advertising into the pornographic. . . . Clothing ads are split, however, . . .between positioning women as object and women as subject" (206). Young identifies three forms of "specifically feminine" pleasures women take in clothing: touch, bonding with other women, and the fantasy of "multiple and changing identities" (207). This contradiction between fashion as oppressive and fashion as emancipatory encapsulates the tensions between ideological construction and affective empowerment.

By working through the forum analysis heuristics and reading essays which examine the relationship between images and consumerism, advertising and class image, and gender and race representations in clothing styles, my students generally offer insightful readings of this contradiction. Leslie Crockett, a first year composition student, writes of Cosmopolitan:


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> The magazine tries to trick its readers into admiring the hated pedestal they try to steer clear of by forcing them to believe that the male-identified, flaw-fixing ads are supposed to make them more powerful, independent women.

And Dan Tursman explains that while concern about fashion is emasculating, Details magazine uses sexist presentations of women to help their reader maintain his masculinity. He writes,

> Directly under the title of the magazine and over a picture of Woody Harrelson, big bold print says "WE'VE GOT A WOODY." Now that's manly! To the right of that, it reads: America's Cups: the Girls of the Pro Bikini Circuit. Nothing like "hooters" to liven up an issue. Now wait a minute....isn't this supposed to be a men's fashion magazine. It's not until the magazine is taken off the shelf that there's any mention of fashion. Well, you pull it off. You walk out of the store with a men's fashion magazine, and you still keep your dignity. You're still a real man!

These are, I think, very sophisticated analyses of gender roles and the way these readers have been constructed as a market for their magazines, but gender literacy asks more than simply noting this contradiction between critiquing and recuperating hegemonic or oppressive structures, such as sexism. For these contradictions cannot be limited to mere ideological "slips" in the texts; they are founded on the very affective alliances which fashion represents in many of our lives.

If a forum analysis stops here, stops with an analysis of

ideological contradictions, cultural critique is reduced to a rational recognition of hegemonic constructions. I am constantly struggling with helping students move beyond this "feeling rational" approach. As feminist educators such as Worsham argue, many overtly political pedagogies have not been successful in reeducating the affective plane, for they still hold to a distinction between public and private, reason and emotion. Suzanne Clark, for example, argues that the field of rhetoric and composition has distorted and censored what she calls the "sentimental," which I read as an aspect of the affective plane. Clark argues that positioning the rational in opposition to emotion and privileging critical distance in educatory practices heightens the division between the academy and the "real world"--that place ostensibly "outside" of the classroom where affective alliances structure and empower humans' lives (106).

There is, of course, no cure-all for this inside/outside, real world/classroom dichotomy. Though most of my students are delighted that they can study the pop culture texts which they know and love, many others have expressed resentment that they must put into a school grid what they enjoy in their off time. I'll never forget a student who, frustrated when confronting the racism of her heroine Madonna's "Like a Prayer" video, turned to me with baleful eyes and said, "But Lisa, when I watch Madonna, I just wanna be happy!" I, exhilarated by her obvious visceral recognition of these racist frameworks, responded, "But why?!" We both looked at each other and laughed, but that moment stays with me as a reminder

that we can't force a reeducation of affective investments and identifications within a classroom framework. Students need space and we need to, in Freire's terms, trust that they'll move on later. Dan, for example, maintained an objective stance throughout his Details analysis. At no point did he discuss his own affective investments in the masculine roles presented in the magazine. It was, however, evident that the issues remained on his mind, for in the next assignment, a microethnography in which he analyzed fraternity parties and dating habits, he explained that the members of his fraternity, which obviously included himself, objectified women because of the pressure to be masculine in their peer groups.

Leslie, on the other hand, made her affective reactions the focus of her paper. She wrote:

> I feel that I do uphold society's ideals of beauty when I read Cosmo, but I do it only as a means of entertainment and as a base for today's fashions, just as most of the readers do. Most don't take issues of real self seriously--at least not from Cosmo. ...I'm not sure that I accept every stereotype or societal ideal presented, but I know that I will overlook them to escape into the false reality on many rainy days and in many mood swings to come.

Here, I think, Leslie is not simply accepting the stereotyped images of the male-identified Cosmo reader. She recognizes that fantasy plays a major role in "fashioning" her sense of self. As George and Shoos stress, "pleasure is not incompatible with understanding" (206).

Like many of my students, Dan and Leslie initially equated cultural critique with cultural rejection; that is, they have been taught--and I think this is enforced in many critical pedagogies which present cultural analysis as what Giroux calls "ideological surgery" 249), that critique requires finding what is bad and oppressive in a text. By encouraging students to analyze the ways their affective alliances have been mobilized, however, we can recast critique as a negotiation of cultural texts, which dispels some of the canned, unengaged, un-affected responses students write when their resistance consists of trying to figure out what the teacher wants them to culturally reject. Simultaneously, as students come to recognize the "historical structure of affective maps" (Grossberg 380), they also come to understand the instability of their identities. And this, while difficult and sometimes painful, is the key to reeducating our affective alliances. The conservative right in this country is successful because it concentrates on issues, rather than identites, because it constructs sites of stable authority and mastery (381). I think it is important that we engage in what Sharon Crowley calls "full frontal" teaching about the ways that mastery is constructed, why it appeals to us.

The split subjectivity represented by contrasting ideological contradictions and affective investments is central in the cultural studies composition course, in the process of writing a self. Our "ready to wear" theories of ideology often cannot hold up as our students fashion their identities in the writing class. In the

same way that we cannot delimit the Jim Berlin fashions sold at this conference to an exclusively ideological framework, we cannot delimit our affective relations to semiotic constructs. Fostering students' awareness of the ways their fantasies, desires and pain circulate in our classrooms is a risk, but perhaps this risk is Jim Berlin's legacy to us.

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